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Summary

'That's just how we do it' Opinions on children's literature in liberal Protestant primary schools

Aim and reasons for this study

The aim of this study was to gain insight into opinions on children's literature found in liberal Protestant primary schools and how these are manifested in educational practice. Liberal Protestant primary schools have an open admissions policy and hence a varied pupil population with a range of ideological ideas. A third of all Dutch primary schools are Protestant, of which by far the majority are liberal Protestant.

The research is interdisciplinary in character; it is founded in educational sciences and the sociology of literature. Chapter 1 describes three practical reasons for the study. The first reason was my experience as a teacher educator with the selection of children's literature in liberal Protestant primary schools. The second reason was the events concerning the Dutch National Children's Book Week about magic in 2005. The third reason was the results of my research on the opinions on children's literature of parents at a liberal Protestant primary school and of 144 teachers at 108 primary schools. As a result of these I had some evidence that liberal Protestant primary schools sometimes withhold books from pupils because, for example, they include magical elements, and that decisions about this are not always openly communicated to parents.

Research questions and method

The three reasons mentioned above resulted in the following research questions:

What opinions on children's literature are found in liberal Protestant primary schools and how are these manifested in school practice?

1. What opinions on the reading culture form part of the opinions on children's literature in the schools and how are they manifested in the choice of books and in working with books?
2. What opinions on the identity of the school form part of the opinions on children's literature in the schools and how are they manifested in the choice of books and in working with books?
3. What pedagogical opinions form part of the opinions on children's literature in the schools and how are they manifested in the choice of books and in working with books?
4. What opinions about the Protestant reading tradition form part of the opinions on children's literature in the schools and how are they manifested in the choice of books and in working with books?

Little research has been done on the complex processes involved in opinions on children's literature in liberal Protestant schools and the way in which these are manifested in educational practice. For this reason I decided to do case-study research in four schools.

Religious identity and pedagogical quality of liberal Protestant primary schools

To understand the context of liberal Protestant primary schools better, as well as selecting schools for the case-study research and points of interest by which to compare and describe the cases, I explored the concepts of 'religious identity' and 'pedagogical quality'. This is described in chapter 2. The school's

religious identity can be expressed in a formal vision but members of the school team (principal and teachers) can interpret it in an informal way. It is known that parents' choice of a liberal Protestant school is not only determined by the distance between home and the school and the quality of education but also by their religious orientation. While the pupil population at liberal Protestant schools is very diverse, the teacher population is characterized by a shared ideological biography. Team members have been brought up Protestant and were educated in Protestant schools. They share this biography with some of the parents. Liberal Protestant schools do vary. They can focus on the narrow visible identity of the school, through religious-knowledge lessons and the celebration of Christian rituals, or give a broader interpretation to the religious identity as an integral part of the curriculum.

Central in my view on pedagogical quality is the development of pupils' personal identity in a pluralistic society. In my view the aim of education is to learn to participate in society in an autonomous, critical and socially responsible way, whilst respecting different ideological and religious views on life. When liberal Protestant schools focus on socializing pupils in the Protestant religion and on internal social cohesion, as well stressing autonomous personal identity formation and preparing pupils for a pluralistic society, tensions and dilemmas may result.

The government stresses technical reading skills and reading comprehension in reading education in primary schools, while attention to a reading culture with room for developing a personal 'reader identity' is less self evident. To realize pedagogical quality in reading education which aligns with the liberal Protestant school identity and prepares pupils for living in a pluralistic society, it is important to pay attention not only to technical reading skills but also to the personal identity development of the pupils.

Protestant reading tradition

Chapter 3 explores the Protestant reading tradition with a view to analysing its role in book selection. This tradition did not consider fantasy books to be useful. It also had problems with books with offensive language, books in which Christian dogmas are not described in a suitable manner and 'titillating literature'. In the Protestant reading tradition orthodox Protestants saw children's literature as a means of conveying religious values. Liberally oriented Protestants stressed that books should correspond to children's interests and also their developmental stage. A small group of free-thinking Protestants considered children's literature to be important for children's social and human development and general religious education. Censorship has never been used in Protestantism. Orthodox Protestants were more inclined to exercise self-censorship, which meant that book selection by parents and teachers became common. 'Internalized censorship' was an important ideal. Children were taught to determine for themselves whether books fitted in with the Protestant ideology.

After the Dutch consociational system along ideological and religious lines faded away in the 1960s, a small group of orthodox Protestants formed their own circle of Christian publishers, booksellers, critics and events. This group chose books with an orthodox Protestant leaning and was opposed to books produced by general publishers. Liberally oriented Protestants initially objected to this orthodox Christian children's literature. Apart from the orthodox view, since the 1970s no religiously oriented Protestant opinions on children's literature have existed. A liberal orientation has vanished.

Since the increasing popularity in the 1990s of fantasy books for children, an important selection criterion for children's literature in evangelical and orthodox Protestant circles is that books do not include magical elements. In 2005 the question of participation in the National Children's Book Week, for example, made it clear that not only orthodox Protestant schools used this selection criterion but also

liberal Protestant schools. When choices are made in liberal Protestant schools concerning ideology and identity, one may expect that team members focus on the liberal school identity. In keeping with the Protestant reading tradition, they can then take aesthetic and ethical considerations into account when selecting children's literature, as well as criteria regarding pupils' ideological diversity. It is also to be expected that they guide pupils on how to choose and discuss books.

Research method

Four schools were selected for the case-study research. I named them after Dutch children's writers: Sjoerd Kuyper, Jan de Liefde, Piet Prins and W.G. van de Hulst. Selection criteria for the case studies focused on similarities and differences between the schools. The schools selected all have a liberal Protestant identity and a school team of at least eight. Furthermore, they are located in an ideologically diverse environment. They made different decisions on participating in the National Children's Book Week about magic. According to the contact persons I spoke to when the schools were selected, two schools appeared to have taken part and two appeared not to have taken part in the Children's Book Week about magic. This later seemed to be less unequivocal than initially thought.

As research instruments I used interviews, document analyses, an inventory of class libraries and written questionnaires. In addition I used more incidental sources such as informal discussions and observations. There were two research groups: school team members (including school principals) and parents. The interviews with 33 team members (29 teachers and four school principals) formed the basis of the description of the cases. The results of the questionnaires completed by team members of the four schools (N=64), research on school documents and class libraries, and the incidental sources provided supplementary information which both illustrated and questioned the findings from the interviews. The questionnaires completed by parents (N=165) and the interviews with some of them (N=14) completed the picture of the schools.

The case studies

The teacher population of three of the schools tends to be liberal Protestant, whereas at the fourth school (W.G. van de Hulst School) the teachers are more orthodox. The pupil population at all the schools is heterogeneous, from non-Christian and Islamic to evangelical. In contrast to the other schools (where there are hardly any Islamic pupils), 30% of the parents at the W.G. van de Hulst School are Muslim. Teachers and principals are scarcely aware of the formal liberal protestant religious identity of their school as stated in school documents. They mainly focus on the narrow identity of religious education and the Christian rituals they perform in the classroom on a daily basis. With regard to diversity they focus on differentiating between Christian and non-Christian groups.

Phonics and reading comprehension are stressed in reading education. Although team members say they find pupils' identity formation and citizenship education to be important, reading is not linked to this in practice. Team members have little knowledge of children's books.

Using the research questions as a guideline I have described the opinions of teachers and school principals. The Sjoerd Kuyper School participated in the National Children's Book Week on magic. The school principal has a clear vision of the liberal Protestant identity of the school and the team members are familiar with his approach, although they do not necessarily share it. A wide variety of books are selected and the school team is of the opinion that the curriculum cannot be determined by parents. Although teachers say that they feel at ease with the liberal Christian identity of the school and do not

withhold books from pupils, they do not consciously choose books or work with them in a way that fits in with this identity. This identity involves taking aesthetic and ethical considerations into account when selecting children's literature, as well as criteria regarding pupils' ideological diversity, and guiding pupils on how to choose and discuss books.

The Jan de Liefde School did not take part in the Children's Book Week 2005. It is customary at this school to comply with the wishes of orthodox Protestant parents, which means that magic books and books with offensive language are avoided. Purchasing Christian children's books is common practice at this school. Although none of the team members are able to articulate the school climate, they all know that it is based on orthodox views and hence they act accordingly.

Although the principal of the Piet Prins School said that the school took part in the Children's Book Week in 2005, the school actually opted for the orthodox alternative. The team members of this school are fairly autonomous. As a result small groups of teachers have made agreements about avoiding magic books, agreements which neither the principal nor some of their colleagues know about. An important reason for the choices made about children's literature is that the school has a reputation of being 'not very Christian'. By avoiding certain books, team members were aiming to improve this negative image.

The W.G. van de Hulst School did not take part in the Children's Book Week about magic. Care for the diverse pupil population, including many Muslim pupils, is a core value at this school, and team members are of the opinion that conflicts must be avoided. Just one evangelical family wants the school to remove certain books. That team members are inclined to meet the parents' wishes is not due to religious reasons; they want to prevent the safe learning environment being affected by conflicts with parents.

Schools' decisions on whether to participate in the National Children's Book Week about magic proved not to be the expression of a consistent policy. Schools vary in different ways but do have in common that their view on liberal Protestant identity formation is somewhat confused.

Results

What opinions on the reading culture form part of the opinion on children's literature in the schools and how are they manifested in the choice of books and in working with books?

The reading culture of the four schools is not strongly developed and does not interface with the liberal Protestant school identity. School policy emphasizes phonics and comprehension skills and there is very little stress on pupils' literary socialization. Children's books are mainly seen as educational tools or creating a particular atmosphere and, therefore, to teachers simply seem to be interchangeable. Owing to a limited knowledge of children's literature and poorly developed literary competence, team members say they find it difficult to develop pedagogical quality in reading education which involves talking about books and coaching pupils in book selection. They do not utilize their experience of working with biblical stories and other key stories in their classrooms. There are few differences between the four schools in their reading culture, but individual team members do vary. The odd enthusiastic teacher regularly pays attention to books in the classroom.

What opinions on the identity of the school form part of the opinions on children's literature in the schools and how are they manifested in the choice of books and in working with books?

It is clear that there is not a formal vision or general opinion on the liberal Protestant identity, but rather an 'identity atmosphere' or 'identity customs' based on team members' images of what 'a Protestant school' should be like. These images are determined by team members' memories of their own school days, previous experiences of dilemmas and existing opinions that the school is in principle intended for 'our' group of colleagues, parents and pupils. Choices regarding the selection of and working with children's literature are not determined by a shared team vision of the religious identity of the school but by a combination of individual characteristics, characteristics of the school team and environmental characteristics. It is not individual team members' personal religious views that determine their choice of children's literature, but the way they relate to the school's religious identity. Some team members, both liberal and orthodox Protestant, are strongly aware of that identity and advocate a wide range of books. Other team members are less aware of the liberal school identity. In some cases they project their personal views on orthodox identity on the school identity and want to exclude books on these grounds. Others are easily inclined to follow the views of colleagues or parents, as they do not have a strong opinion themselves.

Individual characteristics are important in team choices but these choices cannot be regarded as the sum of individual teacher opinions. The principal's position and the role of teachers with strong convictions play a significant role in communal decisions, as do mutual agreements made between team members in the work context.

Regarding characteristics of the environment of the school, teachers proved to have clear ideas about the image of their school in the surrounding area. Moreover, they themselves have images of Protestant schools in the neighbourhood and compare these to their own school. These images are important in relation to what they think about children's literature, as is the stance taken by the association of liberal Protestant primary schools. In addition, teachers are inclined to emphasize the role of orthodox parents and are disinclined to consider the position of other parents who do not take such a prominent stance.

What pedagogical opinions form part of the opinions on children's literature in the schools and how are they manifested in the choice of books and in working with books?

The schools' desire to offer pupils safety and protection and to avoid conflicts is in keeping with their Christian identity. A safe environment is not interpreted as an environment in which critical thinking and learning to choose are considered important but one in which the protected environment corresponds with the environment pupils are growing up in. Although not always aware of it, team members often interpret this as an orthodox environment. They do not question whether an environment that exclusively complies with the wishes of orthodox parents is safe for all pupils. They also do not question whether withholding books is perhaps also a form of influence.

What opinions about the Protestant reading tradition form part of the opinions on children's literature in the schools and how are they manifested in the choice of books and in working with books?

The Protestant reading tradition, which is typified by aesthetic and ethical considerations in selecting children's literature and guiding pupils on how to choose and discuss books, does not play a role at the schools in this study. Team members are scarcely acquainted with this tradition and they do not

base their opinions on it. As orthodox opinions on literature are the most apparent in the media and elsewhere, it is easy for schools to embrace these opinions. Book selection is not well balanced at the schools and there is censorship and self-censorship, with no attempt to fit in with the liberal Protestant identity.

Conclusion

What opinions on children's literature are found in liberal Protestant primary schools and how are these views put into practice?

When I started this research project, I expected that the liberal Protestant school identity would play a role in opinions on children's books and working with them, for example, in the form of well-considered opinions on selecting books and working with them in the class. The case studies did not confirm this; an 'identity atmosphere' proved to be more important. I also assumed that schools would have different opinions about children's literature and identity, given their different decisions regarding the Children's Book Week on magic in 2005. What I found was a variation rather than clear differences. Decisions about participating in the Children's Book week, for example, proved not to be based on a shared view of the reading culture, identity, pedagogical quality and children's literature. The differences between schools were based on complex processes in which individual, team and environmental characteristics play a role.

It can be generally said that while liberal Protestant schools owe their existence to their Christian identity, nowadays teachers at those schools are often unable to explain what that identity is in relation to dealing with literature. Schools' decision to emphasize the safety of their 'own group' is rarely well reasoned and there is little consideration for other groups. In a school culture without a vision on pedagogical quality or identity, where books are treated as a learning aid and team members are not at ease working with books, censorship and self-censorship can easily occur.

On reflection

On reflection it is clear that case-study research was a good choice for this research project, as it was adequate for studying the complex practices of liberal Protestant schools. It also made it possible to make a start with the design of a context-bound theoretical framework on opinions on children's literature in liberal Protestant schools. The social significance of this research project is that it explores the tension between educating pupils for their own religious group and educating pupils to become critical and autonomously thinking citizens in a pluralistic society. The study also leads to a better understanding of the opportunities and limitations regarding the aims of reading education in relation to identity formation. The scientific relevance of this research project lies in the insight it provides into the strategic role of opinions on children's literature in liberal Protestant primary schools. With the help of empirical research, it supplements knowledge on the role of the Protestant reading tradition and of citizenship education in reading education in liberal Protestant primary schools. Team members do not follow a liberally oriented Protestant reading tradition when selecting books and working with them and do not connect this with educating pupils for citizenship.

Further research at other schools could test the hypothesis that tensions between educating pupils for their own Christian group and educating them to function in a pluralistic society are solved by

emphasizing a safe learning environment. The hypothesis that the views of primary-school team members on reading culture, school identity and pedagogical quality are not well developed also requires further research.

Finally, some recommendations for teacher education can be made on the basis of this research. If institutes for teacher education want to educate student teachers to be able to have a voice in constructing a pedagogical view on reading culture and religious identity at their future schools, those students need to reflect on their personal norms and values and to develop a critical view on the context of their work as teachers in liberal Protestant primary schools.